

Tennessee State University and Metropolitan Historical Commission



Wednesday, February 9, 2011

Tennessee State University, Avon Williams Campus

- 8:30 Registration begins
- 9:00 **Welcome and Opening Remarks**  
Mr. Tim Walker, Executive Director, Metropolitan Historical Commission  
Mrs. Linda T. Wynn, Conference Co-Chair
- 9:20 **On the Road to Freedom: African Americans on Wessyngton Plantation During the Civil War**  
Mr. John F. Baker, Jr.
- 9:40 **George Woods and African-American Archaeologists in Middle Tennessee, 1820-1950**  
Dr. Kevin Smith, Middle Tennessee State University
- 10:00 **First Steps Toward Interracial Cooperation in Women's Voluntary Associations:  
The YWCA, the Girl Scouts, and the League of Women Voters**  
Dr. Carole Bucy, Volunteer State Community College
- 10:40 Break
- 11:00 **Remarks**  
The Honorable Karl Dean, Mayor, Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County  
Dr. Gloria G. Johnson, Interim Dean, TSU College of Arts and Sciences
- 11:30 **Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around**  
Mary McCallum and Sista Style Productions
- 12:00 Lunch
- 1:30 **Musical Performance**  
Dara Tucker and Band
- 2:00 **Bibles, Books, and Businesses: The Rise, Decline, and Rebirth of Nashville's Jefferson Street**  
Dr. Learotha Williams, Jr., Tennessee State University
- 2:30 **Closing Remarks**  
Dr. Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr., Conference Co-Chair

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



## Nashville's Jefferson Street

From the Hadley plantation on the west to the Cumberland River on the east, there developed a wide footpath that evolved into a wagon road. This was the antecedent of North Nashville's Jefferson Street. When the Union army occupied Nashville during the Civil War (from 1862 to 1865), several large contraband camps were established in the city. The newly freed African Americans were emancipated as the federal army swept southward and were considered contraband or prizes of war. The women and children were sent to camps, while newly freed black males were sent to serve as support or soldiers in the federal army. A large contraband camp was opened in the area around the site of federal Fort Gillam, north of downtown Nashville. Bisecting Fort Gillam was the wagon road later designated as Jefferson Street.

With the end of the Civil War, many groups began organizing efforts to provide educational opportunities for African Americans. On January 9, 1866, a school opened in Nashville, named in honor of Union General Clinton B. Fisk, who was in charge of federal occupation. Fisk Free Colored School opened in former federal barracks next to the present site of the railroad's Union Station. These facilities deteriorated rapidly, forcing the school to search for new facilities. The efforts of the now-famous Fisk Jubilee Singers during 1871-1872 resulted in the school's purchase of the former site of Fort Gillam and the construction of the school's Jubilee Hall. The impressive structure stands on the high point between thoroughfares later named Seventeenth and Eighteenth Avenues (North), with the old footpath/wagon road behind it. The emerging school,

rechartered as Fisk University in 1872, possessed a robust population using the old artery, and demanding expansion of the bustling thoroughfare. Just to the west, the congregation of the Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church, organized in 1868, constructed a magnificent edifice at what is today Eleventh Avenue North, and Jefferson Street in the 1870s.

By the turn of the century, according to the *Nashville Globe*, the Abraham Lincoln Land Company and the Realty Saving Bank and Trust Company offered lots for sale in the Fisk University Place subdivision, where Negro buyers paid five dollars down and five dollars a month to purchase a lot. The development was located "within four blocks of the Jefferson Street car line." Through an act of the state legislature, the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School was chartered and opened in 1912 along the western edge of Jefferson Street. Several residential communities sprang up around the A. & I. campus, establishing another populace for the street's commerce. With the return of African-American veterans of World War I, the student populations of both Fisk and A. & I. expanded. These veterans made greater demands for services to the African-American community, and the response was manifested in increased commercial development of Jefferson Street.

The Great Depression affected various sectors of Nashville's black economy. The Cedar Street downtown black business district suffered decline, due to the devastating consequences of the economic collapse on working-class blacks. Yet another busi-

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-This publication is a project of the 2011 Nashville Conference on African-American History and Culture. Revised and reprinted from the 1999 Conference, the author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials. Photo of "Engine Company 11, Jefferson Street, Captain Robert Campbell" used with permission and courtesy of the Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library.

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ness district was already forming along Jefferson Street, in what was then suburban North Nashville, and supported by the more affluent, middle-class blacks; this commercial district weathered the economic depression better than downtown Cedar Street, according to research by historian Bobby L. Lovett. Funeral parlors, personal service providers, and retail outlets became the foundation for Jefferson Street businesses. K. Gardner's Funeral Home, Isom's Beauty Shop, William Hawkins' North Side Ice Cream Company, William Hemphill's Press, Terrance Restaurant, Jefferson Street Pharmacy, Menefee and Bauer Tire & Battery Service, I. E. Green Grocery Company, Terry's Pharmacy, and Frank White's Cleaners were prominent businesses located along Jefferson Street. To obtain the tonsorial services of a professional barber, the North Nashville residents continued to patronize establishments on downtown Cedar Street, and it was not until the late 1930s that Crowder's, the first barbershop for blacks, opened on Jefferson Street. The many beauty shops owned by Negro women continued operations, mostly in the front rooms of the operators' homes.

In the mid-1930s, Meharry Medical College moved from South Nashville to a new campus across from Fisk University. Jefferson Street became the northern boundary of the medical college with its teaching hospital. To serve the needs of the educational and medical complex developing within the radius of the Jefferson Street thoroughfare, a number of new retail businesses began to flourish. The 23-block area from Fifth Avenue North to Twenty-eighth Avenue North also contained some of the oldest church congregations within black Nashville. A fire hall located Twelfth Avenue and Jefferson, Engine Company No. 11, also functioned as a gathering spot and informal community center (see photo).

The 1930s also witnessed the birth of a formal entertainment industry as a component of the Jefferson Street montage. Eventually, everything from small, intimate, hole-in-the-wall Chicago-style "speak-easys" to grand nightclubs, supperclubs, dance halls, beer joints, and pool rooms flourished along what became popularly nicknamed "Jeff" Street. There were small eateries and elegant cafes, as well as ice-cream parlors, interspersed with the local landmarks designated as Good Jelly's Club and A. & I.'s barn.

In the age of Jim Crow, black Nashvillians filled the Ritz Theater to enjoy first-release movies, where they were free to enter through the front door and sit in the main audience. For the merchants and residents along Jefferson Street, there was an ease of contact without regard to race. There were four department stores and three were operated by Jewish merchants. Although the African-American Otey family operated a major retail grocery outlet, several white-owned-and-operated groceries, some with integrated staffs and some with white staffs, were prominent along the thoroughfare. The life-affirming bustle along Jefferson Street flowed through bakeries, hardware stores, service and gasoline stations, dry-cleaning establishments (some of which offered made-to-order men's apparel), insurance agencies, and shoe shops... all in proximity to the after-life enterprises of mortuaries, funeral homes, and churches.

Many long-time Nashvillians consider the 1935-65 period as the Golden Age of Jefferson Street. The historic street always reflected the spirit of the season: holidays were always festive, and the smells of seasonal fare greeted the visitor. Thanksgiving morning marked the traditional celebration of A. & I.'s homecoming, with a parade down Jefferson Street. The 1950s and 1960s erupted along Jefferson Street in the marches of the Civil Rights era and the destructive violence of social protest. These manifestations, in concert with the construction of Interstate 40 in the mid-1960s, led to the shattering demise of the transportation artery's vigor, as well as the burial of the myriad culture that symbolized Jefferson Street.

With the beginning of the second decade of the 21st Century, positive efforts are under way with the regard to the future of Jefferson Street. These efforts are through public and private partners, business industry and government. The business activities along historic Jefferson Street are now aided through the efforts of the Jefferson Street United Merchants Partnership (JUMP) -- a very positive concept. Plans have been announced for a new museum to be placed in the eastern area of the street, and for a new connector in the western part of the street that will connect Jefferson Street to the western area of Nashville, facilitating both transportation, business and leisure activities. Hopefully, Jefferson Street will again serve as one of the centers for life in Nashville, Tennessee.

- Reavis L. Mitchell, Jr.

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

## **Riding for Equality and Justice: Nashville Student Activists and the 1961 Freedom Rides**

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On 17 May 2011, the Freedom Riders from Nashville and those cognizant of the modern Civil Rights movement timeline will pause to remember and commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Nashville student activists' entrance into the Freedom Rides of 1961. Because of their heroic actions and refusal to relent to the demands of government officials, the Kennedy administration ultimately directed the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue regulations prohibiting racial segregation in all transportation facilities. The Freedom Rides were not a new tactic of the 1960s Civil Rights struggle. Fourteen years earlier, in 1947, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) organized and implemented the interracial Journey of Reconciliation throughout the Upper South to test the United States Supreme Court decision in the *Morgan v. Virginia* (38 U.S. 373 [1946]) case, which mandated interstate bus desegregation.

As in 1947, the May 1961 Freedom Rides tested another Supreme Court decision, *Boynton v. Virginia* (364 U.S. 454 [1960]), which extended the Court's 1946 directive to all interstate transportation facilities, including terminals, waiting rooms, restaurants, and other amenities. The Court's decision made it unconstitutional to racially segregate waiting rooms, restrooms, and lunch counters. The South, known for its racial rigidity, often dismissed Supreme Court decisions as they related to racial desegregation. James Farmer and CORE were determined to make sure that both the South and the new Kennedy administration recognized that the Court's decision in *Boynton v. Virginia* could not be disregarded. While the 1947 and the 1961 rides were comparable in that

they both tested decisions handed down by the nation's highest court, John Lewis asserts that the 1961 rides had been designed to be more cogent, bolder, and to move further into the deep South. In his *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, Lewis states, "It would be a bolder title as well – nothing so tame and accommodating as 'reconciliation' – which is how Farmer came up with the phrase 'Freedom Ride.' There was a tone of demand in that phrase, a sense of proclamation, of no more waiting."

On 4 May 1961, CORE sent two buses and an assembly of thirteen Freedom Riders (seven black men, three white men, and three white women) on what was intended to be a two-week trip, traveling through the deep South from Washington, DC to New Orleans, to test their right to intermingle blacks and whites in the region's bus stations. CORE officials notified the United States Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of their schedule, which was also transmitted to local police forces, and in Alabama, through them to the Ku Klux Klan. The interracial group encountered only a few problems during their first week of travel. However, when they reached Anniston, Alabama, on that fateful 14 May, the Freedom Riders met a vicious horde of more than 100 angry whites, who brutally beat them and fire bombed the bus. In Birmingham, a mob totting iron pipes and other weapons greeted the riders where they were battered, knocked unconscious, and hospitalized. While the violence garnered national and international attention, it also caused Farmer to terminate the ride.

Although not the progenitors of the Freedom Rides of the 1960s, Nashville's student activists,

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under the leadership of Diane Judith Nash, became their driving force. Despite the Kennedy administration's prodding CORE to abort their plans to ride to New Orleans, Nash and the Nashville student contingent moved into action upon hearing the news about the assault on the Freedom Riders. They felt the ride must continue. In their opinion, the movement's future was at stake. If the rides were terminated, as Diane Nash said, "it would prove that violence could overcome nonviolence." The students comprehended the importance of continuing the Freedom Rides after the Alabama attacks, and strengthened their resolve that the Klan could not be left triumphant to claim control of the streets. On 17 May 1961, recruits left Nashville for Birmingham, on the seventh anniversary of the Supreme Court's unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

When the Nashville student contingent arrived in Birmingham, Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor, the city's racially intolerant chief of police, ordered the new Freedom Riders taken to the Birmingham jail. The following night, he released them at the Tennessee-Alabama state line. Within days, they regrouped and rejoined the route at Montgomery, undeterred by the mob violence in Birmingham or the threat of it that mounted as they approached Montgomery. However, the law enforcement presence that had accompanied their trip suddenly fell away at the city line. It was in Montgomery, the "Cradle of the Confederacy," that the Freedom Riders rode into the national and international consciousness as the media broadcast the mayhem perpetrated upon them by a mob of Klan members and other angry whites. These merciless attacks on those riding for freedom and justice forced the national government to act.

As stated in Mary L. Dudziak's, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, "President Kennedy was angered by the Freedom Riders' persistence." In *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, Richard Reeves asserts that the

President was disconcerted in some measure because the viciousness against the Freedom Riders was "exactly the kind of thing the Communists used to make the United States look bad around the world." Embarrassed by the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, Kennedy was preparing to meet Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, for the first time at a summit conference in Vienna. It was his hope to draw attention away from the Bay of Pigs and establish himself as a global leader. The Freedom Rides obstructed these aims. According to Harris Wofford's *Of Kennedy and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties*, Kennedy "supported every American's right to stand up or sit down for his rights - but not to ride for them in the spring of 1961."

The students' single-mindedness to carry on the Freedom Rides had major consequences for the southern Civil Rights movement. The Freedom Rides continued for the next four months with student activists in the forefront. While segregationists' vindictive show of aggression only served to make the tightly-knit group of trained student activists more resolute to bring down the nation's bastions of racial segregation, it also forced the federal government into action. On 22 September 1961, in response to the Freedom Rides and under pressure from the Kennedy administration, the Interstate Commerce Commission promulgated regulations eliminating racial segregation in train and bus terminals. These regulations went into effect on 1 November 1961.

-- Linda T. Wynn

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# Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

## **Mattie E. Coleman**

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Mattie E. Coleman, physician, missionary, school administrator, activist, lecturer, feminist, and suffragist was born in Sumner County near Gallatin, Tennessee, on July 3, 1870 as Mattie Eliza Howard. The oldest of four children, at age fifteen she was graduated from high school. She continued her studies at Central Tennessee College in Nashville, which was renamed Walden University in 1900; she later entered Meharry Medical College, where she earned her medical degree. In 1902 she married the Reverend P. J. Coleman, a minister in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, now known as the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME). Later, in 1932, she became the first graduate of Meharry's dental hygiene program.

As a 1906 graduate of Meharry Medical College, Coleman was one of the first African American women in Tennessee to become a physician. Soon after graduating from Meharry, she established a medical practice in Clarksville, Tennessee, where her husband had been sent to pastor the Wesley Chapel CME church. In Clarksville, Coleman inculcated her concern for the poor into her practice. Because she combined medicine and missionary work, Dr. Coleman was elected president of the Clarksville District Missionary Society. She was an activist within the CME denomination and became an ardent supporter of women's rights. Coleman and other women fought to change denominational polity that excluded women from helping in the formulation of its national program. This struggle extended beyond the absence of a Connectional Women's Missionary Society, as the organization became known, and into women being licensed to preach and carry on evangelistic work.

Coleman and other women of like mind in the denomination campaigned for the formation of a national women's missionary society. Twice, in 1906 and 1910, they were unsuccessful in their appeals to change the minds of those attending the sessions of the General Conference. Refusing to acquiesce to defeat, they requested another hearing before the General Conference at its 1916 meeting. When Helena B. Cobb, who had been asked to serve as spokesperson, became ill, Coleman became the leader of the women's committee for petition. Two years later, they were successful and the Women's Connectional Missionary Society of the CME church came into being.

The Women's Connectional Missionary Society, which was composed of forty-one women, held its first meeting in Nashville and elected Dr. Mattie E. Coleman as president and Helena B. Cobb as first vice-president. In addition to the office of president and first vice-president, other offices included a second vice-president, secretary, treasurer, community director, chair of literature, chair of the art department, editor, and chaplain. On September 3, 1918, at Capers Chapel CME Church in Nashville, Coleman called the group to action in which she set forth the various ways that they aided in the advancement of the women's movement within the church. The Women's Connectional Missionary Society also drew up a constitution and by-laws for the organization's governance. Coleman held the position of president of the Women's Connectional Missionary Society from 1918 to 1939. Not only was Coleman interested in the rights of women in the church, she also was concerned about women gaining the right to vote.

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In 1920 she collaborated with J. Frankie Pierce, founder of the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and joined forces with white women suffragists to aid in making Tennessee the thirty-sixth state to ratify the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution that gave women the right of the franchise. Earlier in 1919, the Tennessee General Assembly passed a limited suffrage act, which Governor Albert H. Roberts signed into law on April 17, 1919. According to historian Anita Goodstein, Coleman and Pierce's efforts as organizers of black women voters bore fruit in that year's election when twenty-five hundred black women voted for the first time in Nashville's municipal elections.

Coleman not only was a physician, missionary, activist, and suffragist, she was also a school administrator. In 1909 she became the first dean of women and medical advisor, as well as a lecturer at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. In April 1921, through the efforts of Coleman and Pierce, the Tennessee General Assembly enacted legislation for the creation of the Tennessee Vocational School for Colored Girls. Pierce became the school's first superintendent serving from 1921 to 1939. Dr. Coleman followed Pierce as superintendent and served from 1939 until her death in 1942. She was also appointed medical examiner of the Court of Calanthe, an appointment she held for more than twenty years. Dr. Coleman was the first American Black women physician to serve as a state tuberculosis advisor and counselor.

A trailblazer, Dr. Mattie E. Coleman cleared the path for black women not only in the medical profession but also in the male-dominated sanctuary of the black church and society in general. She provided medical attention to children and those less fortunate. She assisted Mother Sallie Sawyer and Estelle Haskins in founding Bethlehem Center in Nashville.

A significant leader in the history of Nashville and the state of Tennessee, in 1993, when the Missionary Council celebrated the 75th Anniversary of the Women's Missionary Council of the CME denomination, they placed a monument on Coleman's grave in Nashville's Greenwood Cemetery.

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- Linda T. Wynn

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